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**The Mexican Invasion...By Invitation Only:
A Critical Look at the Legacy and Consequences of
The Bracero Program, 1942-1964.**

**HannaLore Hein
Tuesday April 12, 2011
History Department: Honors Thesis**

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Primary Advisor - Patricia Limerick
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Abstract:

This thesis will analyze the Bracero Program, a temporary guest-worker program between Mexico and the United States that spanned twenty-two years between 1942 and 1964. This program was a joint venture that both countries deemed necessary as a result of the sudden labor shortage caused by World War II. Over the course of the program nearly 5 million Mexican nationals participated as Braceros and worked on American farms and on railroads in over twenty-four states.¹ Although in economic terms the Bracero Program was a success, providing financial stability for farmers and monetary compensation for Bracero workers, the development of this program over two decades caused many unforeseen consequences that ultimately tainted the economic success of this program.

Throughout the following thesis I will argue that the Bracero Program failed as a government-sponsored program. The reasons for this failure stem firstly from poor planning on the part of government officials, insufficient infrastructure to run such a program, and a lack of enforcement on the ground level. I will argue that the political climate of the 1940s and 1950s influenced the creation of government documents central to the Bracero Program. The politically charged language within these documents affected the U.S. perception and treatment of Bracero workers and undermined the structure and success of the program.

I will also examine the impact of illegal immigration on the Bracero Program, and the inadequate and unsuccessful response to remedy this problem by both the United

¹ Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), ix, 50.

States and Mexico.

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List of Illustrations:

The Subsequent images were originally taken at a recruiting center in Mexico City in 1942 and are used throughout the text.





² University of California, "Agricultural Personnel Management Program: Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources," *Labor Management Decisions* vol. 3 no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1993).
http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/gallery.html

Acknowledgements:

I would personally like to thank all of the members of my committee for agreeing to take part in this process and for lending me valuable feedback on my written work and oral defense. I would especially like to thank my primary advisor, Patty Limerick, for her support and guidance throughout this entire project.

I would also like to thank my mother, Cheryl Hein and my friends, Meagan Taylor, Denise Yogerst, for their continued encouragement and support. I would also like to personally thank my “thesis buddy,” Alan Sielaff, for his friendship and encouragement.

I could not have successfully written and defended this honors thesis without the help, friendship, and support of all of those listed above. Thank you all so much.

Introduction:

The United States is a country shaped, influenced, and built by immigrants. People from around the world have flocked to the United States in search of new experiences and economic opportunities. While this continues to be the case, there is one particular period of immigration history that has affected the economic and demographic conditions of the United States more so than any other. The period ranging from 1942 to 1964 is characterized by mass Mexican migration to the United States under the international agreement known as the Bracero Program. The Mexican and American governments created this program as a temporary guest-worker program in order to fill the labor shortage created by World War II. The program ultimately lasted twenty-two years and has had a lasting and profound effect on the development of the society and the economy of both the United States and Mexico.³ In order to understand how this program came into existence it is first necessary to outline and explain the general patterns found in the history of immigration to the United States.

Historian Richard White characterizes the mass movement of people into the Western region of the United States as a series of streams that ebb and flow throughout seasons, years, and decades, each flowing from a different direction and each carrying any vast number of people.⁴ While this analogy is useful in terms of tracking the arrival of immigrants to the United States it can be misleading when attempting to understand the more recent history of immigration into the Western region. Rather than looking at

³ Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 173.

⁴ Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 183.

immigration as a stream, which usually can only flow one direction, it is more fitting to use a cyclical image when describing the history of immigration into the West. The reasons for this are two fold. Firstly, this model better depicts how the public sentiment towards immigration throughout the 19th and 20th century changed according to different migrating populations or groups of people. And secondly, it is useful when discussing the movement of people into the West whose migration was temporary. By examining immigration into the West as a tide that rises and falls with changing public opinion, a tide that comes in and goes out with varying economic climates, a tide that is affected by political change or soothed by the calming effects of political stability, it becomes clear that immigration into the West is indeed a complicated history that requires careful and subtle analysis.⁵ I will apply this analogy of a moving tide to immigration stemming from the mid 1800s to the mid 1900s so as to reach a general consensus of what immigration looked like leading up to the creation of the Bracero Program.

The migrants that traveled into the Western region of the United States beginning in the mid-1800s were typically Caucasian native-born Americans traveling from the Eastern regions of the United States. This trend was dominant due to the fact that there lacked any sort of legislation that specifically restricted the movement of these people into the Western region of the United States.⁶ Although the United States encouraged

⁵ Although it is useful to use a tide as a metaphor for immigration it is also important to note that there are obvious differences between the immigrants in the metaphorical tide and the water in a real tide. Water molecules within a tide do not make conscious decisions to travel one way or another. Aside from the slight polarity of water molecules, there is nothing to attract or deter them from going in a particular direction. Immigrants on the other hand, are living, thinking beings. They choose when and where to migrate. Although it is ironic that they follow similar patterns as water molecules, it is important to separate the two in order to show these distinctions. It is also ironic that water, which is scarce in the West, is so often used as a metaphor to describe immigration, which is abundant in the West.

⁶ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 186.

these immigrants to migrate in the mid-1800s, this did not mean that all immigrants succeeded in their quest for opportunity in the West. In addition to the movement of native-born Americans, there were also a vast number of non-native born white immigrants including people of German, Norwegian, Irish, and Scandinavian descent. Again, while the United States government allowed and encouraged these people to settle the West they, like their American-born counterparts, were not always successful in their ventures.⁷ In some cases these initial tides of people returned East after failing to establish themselves in the West. These trends of westward migration, however, continued to develop and grow throughout the 19th century.

These white immigrants eventually came under scrutiny by the residents of Western territories and states, and a sense of hatred developed towards these newcomers. This shift indicates a change in American public sentiment as residents of Western territories and states no longer accepted the migration of these people into the West. A prime example of this is the scorn and hatred that arose for the immigrants from Oklahoma who traveled West and who were often referred to as the derogatory term “Okies.”⁸

In addition to American and European immigrants who traveled into the West beginning in the mid-1800s, Asian immigrants also made up a measurable percentage of foreign-born immigrants.⁹ Chinese immigration in particular followed a very cyclical

⁷ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 186-187.

⁸ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 151.

⁹ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 187.

pattern first peaking during the California Gold Rush of 1849. The majority of these first immigrants, however, returned to China.¹⁰ This phase represents the first of three cycles of Chinese immigration. Following the Gold Rush another phase of Chinese immigration began, and although these numbers were not as large as those of the Gold Rush era, they still made a significant contribution to the immigration to the West in the 1800s. This contribution was so significant that it prompted U.S. legislators to write the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which essentially stopped Chinese immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The final phase of Chinese immigration would not begin until after World War II, and it, like its predecessors, followed very cyclical patterns.¹¹

While these distinct immigrant groups migrated for many of the same reasons, their individual experiences differed slightly. These differences, however, are minimal when the over all pattern of immigration and the consequent discrimination of these immigrant groups are analyzed on a larger scale. These patterns act as precedents for the migration of Mexican citizens into the United States in the early 1900s. And while it is important to understand these general patterns of migration, the underlying factors for Mexican migration must be analyzed and developed more fully in order to understand the full significance of the Bracero Program of 1942-1964.

Although there is a long history of movement of Mexican people throughout the lands that would become the American West and Southwest, Mexican immigration began to influence and affect the United States differently after 1848. This date is significant for

¹⁰ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 187.

¹¹ White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 187.

immigration history because with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Mexican-American border underwent a lasting and drastic change.¹² The American government formally partitioned the territory of the American West, and many people who had been living in northern Mexico suddenly found themselves within the borders and laws of another country. While this date is significant for Chicano scholars studying Mexican-American history and culture, I will use this date to determine a starting point for the study of Mexican immigration into the Western region of United States. From 1848 until the early 1900s Mexican immigration did exist, although the numbers were much smaller than those of the 20th century it is still important to recognize these early migration patterns as precursors for later phases of immigration.

For the purpose of this analysis, the history of Mexican immigration to the United States started in the early 1900s.¹³ Many historians have framed this debate in terms of “push” and “pull” factors that contributed to the reasons why Mexicans immigrated to the Western region of the United States. This framework, however, has come under scrutiny recently due to the fact that this model can be limiting in its analysis, relying solely on set conditions in the sending and host countries that “function independently of each other.”¹⁴ This type of analysis also begs the question of whether Mexican immigration can be viewed in a binary framework, disregarding outside factors.¹⁵ While these questions and

¹² Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 58.

¹³ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 113.

¹⁴ Gilbert G. Gonzales and Raul A. Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 32-33.

¹⁵ Gonzales and Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History*, 34.

concerns are important to think about with regard to the general history of Mexican immigration, these factors still play an important role in laying out the context for the later analysis of the Bracero Program.

Many historians describe two major “push” factors when discussing Mexican immigration in the early 1900s. First, there are the policies of Mexican dictator, Porfirio Diaz. Historians characterize this era as a time where many Mexican citizens lacked political freedom and social and economic mobility.¹⁶ Although Porfirio Diaz was able to bring considerable material wealth to Mexico in the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was at a considerable price. Aside from the small elite class, the majority of Mexico’s population experienced little if any improvements in their economic situations during this era, also known as the Porfiriato.¹⁷ The Mexican government sought to revive the hard-rock mining industry and begin development in the oil industry with the support of foreign capital. They also used foreign capital, mostly from the United States, to build a vast series of railroads linking major Mexican cities to one another and to northern United States border towns. In addition to the development of industry under the Porfiriato, Diaz also began a massive process of land redistribution whereby the Mexican government began dividing communal *ejido* lands of the peasant and lower classes in order to make more land available to the upper class elite and Anglo entrepreneurs.¹⁸ This process of land redistribution drastically upset the traditional way of life for the majority of the

¹⁶ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 115-117.

¹⁷ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 116.

¹⁸ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 116-117.

peasantry and led to even greater contempt for Porfirio Diaz and his regime. These policies eventually led to the second push factor that most historians cite as influential for migration: The Mexican Revolution of 1910.

The Mexican Revolution started in response to the policies of Porfirio Diaz, however, this revolution is also characterized as a peasant fight for land. This rebellion, however, soon became a struggle for political power.¹⁹ The Mexican Revolution is an event in Mexican history characterized by increasing violence. It is estimated that between 1.5 and 2 million Mexican citizens, including women and children, died during the Revolution.²⁰ As fear, violence and uncertainty became part of everyday life, many Mexicans sought refuge in the United States.²¹ These two factors greatly contributed to the desire of Mexicans to migrate to the United States, but there are also pull factors that encouraged this migration.

The pull factors stemming from the United States are usually characterized by the all encompassing term “opportunity;” however, more precisely these factors were labor demands and higher paying wages.²² One period in particular that represents these pull factors occurred during World War I. In 1917, the United States faced a labor shortage due to the U.S. involvement in World War I. The United States government, in response to this dilemma, altered immigration laws in order to facilitate the migration of temporary

¹⁹ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 118-119.

²⁰ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 119.

²¹ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 119.

²² Gonzales and Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History*, 35.

Mexican workers.²³ The period from 1917-1918, known as the first Bracero Program, can be seen as a precursor for the larger, more pronounced and complicated Bracero Program of 1942-1964. The creation of this initial program illustrates how important the pull and push factors are when discussing Mexican immigration. This program is also evidence of the cyclical nature of Mexican immigration into the Western region of the United States during the 20th century.

These factors continued to affect the number of Mexican immigrants traveling into and out of the United States in the first two decades of the 20th century. By 1929 another factor, the Great Depression, also affected this cyclical movement of people, but in a less positive and encouraging fashion. The economic strife that plagued the United States in the 1930's also affected the Mexican migrants.²⁴ Due to the lack of jobs and the possibility of a complete collapse of industry in the United States, many Mexican migrants voluntarily returned to Mexico. Others were not given a choice. The repatriation of Mexican workers during the 1930's was a very large undertaking that the United States was surprisingly able to accomplish. Some historians state that American authorities forcibly removed between one-third and one-half of the Mexicans in the United States to Mexico between 1929 and 1935.²⁵ In addition to the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl of the early 1930's also resulted in a lack of jobs and aided in the overall dismal economic

²³ Fernando Saul Alanis Enciso, *El Primer Programa Bracero Y El Goberino De Mexico, 1917-1918* (San Luis Potosi: El Colegio de San Luis, 1999), 33-36. This source is very informative and is used in this case to show the existence of the first Bracero Program. This is done in order to show that the patterns of immigration are not necessarily unique.

²⁴ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 139.

²⁵ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 149.

situation in the United States especially in the West and Midwest. It would not be until the early 1940's that Mexican immigration would return to and then surpass the pre-1930's rates.²⁶

The history of immigration into the Western region of the United States is characterized by a cyclical pattern of boom and bust, and the particular history of Mexican immigration is no exception. Mexican immigration of the mid to late 20th century in general, and the Bracero Program in particular, followed the same cyclical patterns of previous groups of immigrants although the total number of immigrants would greatly increase. The importance of this period of immigration history has also grown in recent years and as a result the historiography of this time period has grown as well.

The historiography of Mexican immigration into the Western region of the United States during the mid to late 20th century is very rich. Many noted historians have written about the economic and political consequences of immigration and in particular the Bracero Program of 1942-1964. Historian and Professor Ernesto Galarza wrote one of the first comprehensive and detailed accounts of this program. Galarza published his book, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*, in 1964, the same year that the government-sponsored Bracero Program ended. Although his account is limited in that it only focuses on the Bracero Program as it pertains to the State of California, it covers the chronological entirety of the program.²⁷

Another account written less than a decade after the end of the Bracero Program is

²⁶ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 150-151.

²⁷ Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte: McNally and Loftin, 1964), 9-16.

The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy. This piece, written by Richard B. Craig, chronicles the bureaucratic history of this program and analyzes how the international environment during this period affected the migrant workers and the overall health of the Bracero Program. Craig also goes into detail about how interest groups in both Mexico and the United States influenced the course of the Bracero Program.²⁸

In addition to the bureaucratic and general histories of the Bracero Program, historians have also written about this program from a cultural perspective in order to include the experiences of these immigrants in the retelling of their own history. These accounts are usually included in works by Chicano scholars or in works about Chicano history. Books such as *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations and Migration*, coauthored by Professors Gilbert G. Gonzales and Raul A. Fernandez, describe the social, cultural and economic experiences of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans in 20th century America.²⁹ *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*, written by Manuel G. Gonzales is also a fine piece of history covering the experiences of Mexicans over the vast time period from the pre-arrival of the Spanish in the 1500s to the present.³⁰

As a complement to the Chicano focus, some historians have written anthologies based on oral histories of Mexican immigrants. While oral histories can at times be biased in their interpretation, or misleading due to the realities of interviewing, they are still a

²⁸ Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), ix-xvii.

²⁹ Gonzales and Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History*, xi-xv.

³⁰ Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 1-7.

vital piece of the information in regard to the story of Mexican immigration. One such anthology, compiled by Marilyn P. Davis, *Mexican Voices, American Dreams: An Oral History of Immigration to the United States*, covers the experiences of people from a broad spectrum of social statuses and also a broad chronology.³¹ These histories, based on the personal experiences of Mexican immigrants offer great insight into the way in which the Bracero Program affected the daily lives of Mexican immigrants.

In addition to the thematic understanding of the Bracero Program, some historians have also written about this program in a comparative fashion. Seeing as this program was a bi-national agreement that lasted for over two decades, it seems natural that there are some historians writing about the Bracero program in terms of the benefits and consequences from the perspectives of both Mexico and the United States. This particular area within the historiography of the Bracero Program, however, is somewhat limited in its scope and could benefit from additional comparative scholarship.

While the historiography of this time period and of the Bracero Program are well developed, there is still room for improvement in scholarship regarding the historical study of the implementation and consequences of the program. In an effort to add to the historiography, I will argue that although the Bracero Program was an attempt by U.S. and Mexican lawmakers to alleviate an apparent labor shortage caused by World War II, it failed as a government program due to poor planning, insufficient infrastructure, and an overall lack of enforcement. I will also argue that although the program succeeded in stabilizing the agricultural sector of the United States, it allowed and encouraged illegal

³¹ Marilyn P. Davis, *Mexican Voices, American Dreams: An Oral History of Mexican Immigration to the United States* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), introduction.

immigration of Mexican nationals into the United States. This, in turn, forced the United States to implement another program, Operation Wetback, to attempt to alleviate the problem of illegal immigration. These broader arguments are broken down into the following chapters.

Chapter one of this thesis, titled *The Development of the Bracero Program: The Consequences of Political Language within Government Documents*, will focus on the political aspect of the Bracero Program. Within this chapter I will lay out the reasoning behind the creation of the Bracero Program. I will focus mostly on government action and inaction, and will analyze how the political language used within the Bracero Program agreements and subsequent documents shaped the images, understandings, and experiences of the Bracero workers. By analyzing the political language in the context of government action and inaction I will argue that the government-sponsored Bracero Program caused an increase in discrimination and mistreatment of legal migrant workers.

Chapter two of this thesis, titled *Parallel Paths: The Influence and Effect of Illegal Immigration During the Bracero Program*, will focus on the inability of government agencies to control illegal immigration during the Bracero Program. Using primary and secondary documents, I will argue that insufficient infrastructure and enforcement along the Mexican border and throughout the West, initially caused by government inaction, led to the increased arrival of illegal immigrants that ran parallel to the arrival of legal contracted Braceros. I will then argue that the presence of these illegal immigrants aided in perpetuating the negative image of Mexicans as criminal and the subsequent discrimination against the legal Bracero workers. These two consequences ultimately undermined the success of the entire Bracero Program.

Within these chapters, I will argue that the American and Mexican governments initially created the Bracero Program as a means of supplying needed agricultural assistance to American farmers during WWII. While this program was at times economically successful for both parties, the program itself was ultimately undermined by the very entities that created it. This in turn led to an under-appreciation of Bracero workers and an increase flow of illegal immigration. These consequences are the seeds of the immigration problems that these two countries face today.

Chapter One

The Development of the Bracero Program: The Consequences of Political Language within Government Documents

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 brought the United States into World War II.³² This attack also indirectly led to the creation of a temporary guest-worker program between the United States and Mexico known as the Mexican Farm Labor Program, but more commonly referred to as the Bracero Program. The term Bracero, derived from the Spanish word *braco*, meaning arm, is generally translated as “farm hand,” and is used throughout this analysis as one word in the name of a government-sponsored program. It will also be used to refer to the individual Mexican workers who participated in the program.³³

This chapter will focus primarily on the early years of the Bracero Program, ranging from 1942-1951, and will highlight how government officials and the subsequent documents they produced created and perpetuated a sense of animosity towards the invited Mexican Bracero workers. I will then apply this framework to the later years of the Bracero Program, ranging from 1951-1964. This chapter will also examine the creation of the Bracero Program in terms of how it perpetuated the development of the stereotypical image of Mexicans as able-bodied manual laborers and how this image, coupled with the political language of the time, led to instances of heightened

³² Robert D. Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 140-142.

³³ Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), ix.

discrimination against Mexican migrant workers. By analyzing the Bracero Program within this framework, I will show how the patterns of hostility towards Braceros developed and blossomed throughout the 1940s and continued to escalate throughout the 1950s and 1960s, eventually leading to the demise of the program in 1964.

Prior to U.S. involvement in World War II, there was a presence of Mexican agricultural workers in the United States despite legislation aimed at curbing immigration into the country. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1917 was an attempt by U.S. lawmakers to limit immigration into the country; however, through a loophole in the law the federal government allowed entry to Mexican agricultural workers. This law was the basis for legal Mexican migration into the United States until the early 1940s when interesting circumstances created by the United States' involvement in World War II established the need for new legislation on immigration into the United States.³⁴

The United States' involvement in World War II was the catalyst for the increased, regulated, and immediate migration of Mexican farm laborers in to the United States. Prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, many farmers throughout the West expressed their need and desire for additional labor and repeatedly asked the federal government to alleviate the labor shortfall by allowing and increasing the migration of Mexican agricultural workers into the United States. Many lawmakers at the time, and historians in retrospect, viewed the Selective Service Act of 1940 and the National Defense Act of 1941 as reasons for the increased urgency that many Western farmers felt

³⁴ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 7.

regarding the fear of an agricultural labor shortage.³⁵ The United States government, however, ignored these early requests for additional migrant workers citing that there was sufficient domestic labor to supply the needs of Western farmers.³⁶ With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, however, the federal government changed its position on the apparent need for migrant labor after realizing how U.S. involvement in the war would drastically change both the economic and demographic situation at home.

By May of 1942 the United States federal government realized that the farmers' fears of a labor shortage were in fact becoming a reality due to the exodus of domestic farm laborers into U.S. military service and various wartime industries.³⁷ As more and more farmers prepared for their crops to go unharvested, the federal government began making plans to discuss the creation of a Bracero Program with the Mexican government.³⁸ At this point the United States government understood the connection between domestic and foreign affairs and they realized that the survival of soldiers and the chance at victory against Germany and Japan had everything to do with the success of the agricultural sector at home.³⁹ The U.S. federal government was also aware of the complications that might arise when attempting to develop, plan, and implement a temporary worker program to alleviate this labor shortage and therefore took precaution

³⁵ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 36-38.

³⁶ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 38.

³⁷ Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Program* (Charlotte: McNally & Loftin, 1964), 43.

³⁸ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 39-40.

³⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 39.

and waited for the appropriate time to approach the Mexican government to discuss such a program.⁴⁰ For this reason the United States federal government, although aware of the urgency associated with the issue of a labor shortage, waited until June 15th, two weeks after Mexico's June 1st declaration of war on the Axis powers, to begin discussions of a possible Bracero Program.⁴¹

In order to facilitate the discussion of such a program, the Mexican government created an inter-departmental committee to “study the various aspects of the migration of the braceros.”⁴² This committee included representatives from the departments of Foreign Affairs, Labor and the Interior. It was understood that these discussions and any subsequent agreements would be decided on by representatives from both Mexico and the United States and that these two parties would jointly “guarantee compliance with the terms of the contract.”⁴³ The final draft of the Bracero Program agreement became official on August 4, 1942 after an exchange of diplomatic papers, a mere seven weeks after the initial discussions began.⁴⁴ Both the United States and Mexico realized that these matters needed to be finalized with the utmost urgency albeit for different reasons.

Initially the Mexican government did have reservations about agreeing to participate in this program. These fears stemmed from previous experiences with mistreatment and discrimination of migrant workers during the first Bracero Program of

⁴⁰ Galarza, *The Merchants of Labor*, 43.

⁴¹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 40.

⁴² Galarza, *The Merchants of Labor*, 47.

⁴³ Galarza, *The Merchants of Labor*, 47.

⁴⁴ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 42.

1917-1918, and from the forced repatriation of Mexican nationals by the United States government during the 1930s.⁴⁵ In addition to these concerns many of the Mexican committee members viewed the exodus of so many Mexican nationals to the United States as detrimental to the economic growth of Mexico.⁴⁶ These concerns, although seriously considered, did not cause enough alarm to discourage the Mexican government from agreeing to participate in the Bracero Program. Rather, from the discussions that took place over the summer of 1942, many Mexican officials began to see participation in this program in more positive terms.

One of the positive outcomes that Mexican committee members cited for participating in this program pertained to the new knowledge that the Braceros would gain regarding agricultural practices. Committee members argued that this newfound knowledge could then be applied to Mexico's agricultural industries and therefore rather than being a detriment to the growth of the agricultural sector in Mexico, participation in this program would be advantageous.⁴⁷ In addition, the Mexican government viewed their participation in the Bracero Program in economic terms and realized how this program could help create economic stability for those individual Mexicans who participated, thus creating economic wealth for Mexico as a whole. More importantly, however, the Mexican government came to see their participation in this program as part of their

⁴⁵ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 41.

⁴⁶ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 41.

⁴⁷ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 41.

contribution to the Allied war effort.⁴⁸ These realizations convinced the Mexican government to agree to participate in such a migrant-worker program with the United States. The next step was determining what this agreement would look like and what provisions it would include.

Discussions regarding the guarantees, implementation, and duration of the Bracero Program began in early July 1942, and by July 22, 1942, representatives from both Mexico and the United States had finalized a draft of the informal bi-national agreement.⁴⁹ Although this draft was nearly complete, certain aspects of the program were still being considered. According to correspondence between American Ambassador to Mexico, George S. Messersmith and the American Secretary of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard, one piece of the agreement was still undecided: Who would be responsible for recruiting the Mexican laborers, the Americans or the Mexicans? Up until this point it was assumed that the Mexican government would take on the responsibility of recruiting and selecting the laborers. Under the Mexican Constitution, however, it was considered illegal for the Mexican government to actively recruit laborers for this program.⁵⁰ After considering this piece of information Ambassador Messersmith adamantly insisted that

⁴⁸ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 41-42.

⁴⁹ Letter from G.S. Messersmith to Secretary of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard. July 22, 1942. p 1. As printed in United States Farm Security Administration, *Farm Security Administration Reports and Miscellaneous Documents: Mexican Farm Labor Transportation Program, 1943-1944*. Compiled by The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. (herein after referred to as *Farm Security Administration Reports*)

⁵⁰ Galarza, *The Merchants of Labor*, 46. Galarza explains that article 123 of the 1917 Constitution prohibits, “unregulated hiring of its citizens for employment abroad.”

the United States be “primarily responsible for the recruiting and selection of labor.”⁵¹

In addition to the concerns regarding which government should be responsible for the recruiting, the correspondence between these two gentlemen also indicated which governmental departments should take on the responsibility of recruiting and monitoring this program. Messersmith urged Secretary Wickard to allow the Farm Security Administration, under the Department of Agriculture, to have the sole responsibility of monitoring and enforcing the recruitment of the Bracero Program. Ambassador Messersmith also insisted that if any other agencies, such as the Employment Bureau, Immigration Services or Public Health Services became involved with the recruiting process, that they should answer directly to the Farm Security Administration, seeing as they would have “the major responsibility” of handling recruitment concerns.⁵² These letters and correspondence offer insight into how these government officials expected the Bracero Program to unfold; however, they also offer valuable insight into how the United States government perceived the Bracero Program as a whole and the individual Mexican migrants that would eventually take part in this government-sponsored program.

Upon insisting that the Farm Security Administration, under the Department of Agriculture, be solely responsible for the recruitment of Mexican migrants, Mr. Messersmith actively encouraged the stereotypical understanding of Mexicans as “able-bodies” capable of labor, rather than as “employees.” There existed during this time

⁵¹ Letter from G.S. Messersmith to Secretary of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard. July 22, 1942. p. 1 As printed in *Farm Security Administration Reports*.

⁵² Letter from G.S. Messersmith to Secretary of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard. July 22, 1942. p.2 As printed in *Farm Security Administration Reports*.

period an understanding of Mexicans, especially men, only in terms of the labor that their bodies could produce. Scholar Natalia Molina describes how pro-immigration advocates viewed Mexican migrants.⁵³ She writes that, “immigrants were considered advantageous only to the extent they filled critical gaps in the labor market.”⁵⁴ Molina illustrates how many American citizens developed an understanding of Mexicans based on “the group’s special affinity for manual labor” seeing as they were “uniquely able-bodied.”⁵⁵

By placing the responsibility of recruiting these “bodies” in the hands of a department that has historically been responsible for monitoring commodities, Mr. Messersmith essentially put the United States in a position of “recruiting” the commodity of labor. Although later the responsibility of recruitment and monitoring of Mexican migrant workers would shift to the United States Department of Labor, the decision to let the Farm Security Administration monitor the initial recruitment did nothing to deter the American public and American farmers from associating the Bracero Program with the commodity of cheap labor, as opposed to Mexican employees.⁵⁶ Despite this possibly unforeseen consequence, however, the two governments agreed upon the recruiting detail, and on August 4, 1942 the informal agreement between Mexico and the United States regarding the temporary migration of agricultural workers went into effect.⁵⁷

⁵³ Natalia Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican: Immigration, Race and Disability in the Early-Twentieth-Century United States,” *Radical History Review* 94 (Winter 2006): 24.

⁵⁴ Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican,” 24.

⁵⁵ Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican,” 24.

⁵⁶ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 47. The responsibility shifted from the Farm Security Administration to the War Manpower Commission in June of 1943.

⁵⁷ 56-Stat-1759.

The original Bracero Agreement of August 1942 was an informal agreement between Mexico and the United States regulating the migration of temporary Mexican agricultural workers. This agreement was a compromise that met the requirements of both the American and Mexican governments and was an attempt by both parties to protect their national interests and citizens. This document, although updated yearly, remained virtually unchanged and would serve as the legal framework for the Bracero Program between 1942 and 1947.⁵⁸ Within the document itself, however, the use of derogatory and discriminating language succeeded in countering many of the provisions that the agreement promised to uphold and protect.

Among some of the most harsh language used throughout this document is the reference of Braceros in the economic terms of supply and demand. This language, used by both the Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ezequiel Padilla, and the American Ambassador to Mexico, George S. Messersmith, degrades the Mexican nationals by referring to them as commodities of the state.⁵⁹ In one of the letters preceding the Bracero Agreement of 1942, Padilla voiced his concern to Messersmith over the welfare of the Mexican nationals, albeit in slightly more offensive terms. Padilla wrote, “This Department considers itself under the obligation of pointing out the importance for the country at the present moment of conserving intact its human material...”⁶⁰ The term

⁵⁸ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 37. Both parties originally agreed to keep this program in existence as an “emergency measure” and was “scheduled to expire with the end of the hostilities.” The end of World War II did not, however, lead to the end of the Bracero Program. Instead both parties agreed to extend the original agreement to December 31, 1947.

⁵⁹ 56-Stat-1759.

⁶⁰ 56-Stat-1759.

“human material” is in essence defining Mexican national agricultural workers as a resource of labor and as property of the state. Here again, the Bracero workers are being examined in terms of their bodies and their bodies’ ability to produce work for the benefit of the state.. The use of such degrading language in government documents only perpetuated the negative connotations of Mexican nationals as commodities in the minds of the American people.

Another example of the misuse of language is seen through correspondence between two officials in the California office of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare.⁶¹ The correspondence is between John H. Provinse, the Acting Head of the Division and Davis McEntire, the Regional Leader of California. Throughout their lengthy correspondence these two government officials continuously refer to the ways in which California growers use the terms of “supply” and “demand” of labor and the need to “import” said labor from Mexico specifically.⁶²

Provinse explained that many of the reasons that growers, especially sugar beet growers in California, clamored for Mexican labor was because they were believed to be the only migrants cable of doing “stoop labor.” He pointed out that the only other migrant populations semi-capable of completing the manual labor associated with beet harvesting, the Filipinos and Japanese, were becoming limited in “supply” due to war-time industries and immigration restrictions. However, Provinse illustrated how growers have attempted

⁶¹ Letter from Davis McEntire to John H. Provinse, April 13, 1942. As printed in *Farm Security Administration Reports*.

⁶² Letter from Davis McEntire to John H. Provinse, April 13, 1942. As printed in *Farm Security Administration Reports*.

to cope with this situation by requesting the “importation” of migrant Bracero labor.⁶³

This letter illustrates the way in which economic language within political documents negatively affected the image of migrant Braceros and their experiences in the United States. This letter not only shows how repeated government discourse over the “supply” and “importation” of labor associated with migrant workers affected the American public sentiment in California, but it also illustrates how growers assumed that only specific racial groups were capable of performing certain types of manual labor. Provinse’s report also indicated that many beet growers were continuing to request imported labor. He wrote, “The petitions for importation of Mexican labor do not require that the labor imported be skilled beet or vegetable workers, indeed they would be very difficult to come by. All that is required is that they be Mexicans.”⁶⁴ Again, this is evidence of how the political language of the 1940’s exaggerated the use of the stereotypical image of the Mexican and thus led to heightened discrimination and prejudice of these migrant Bracero workers.

Aside from the economic language of supply and demand used in correspondence between government officials, the bi-national Bracero Agreement of 1942 outlined the provisions that both governments agreed to uphold and enforce. However, these promises and provisions, listed below, did nothing to counter the government officials’ offensive and contradictory language. This was in part due to the fact that many of these provisions were not upheld by the respective authorities; however, it also stemmed from the general

⁶³ Letter from Davis McEntire to John H. Provinse, April 13, 1942 As printed in *Farm Security Administration Reports*.

⁶⁴ Letter from Davis McEntire to John H. Provinse, April 13, 1942, p.8 As printed in *Farm Security Administration Reports*.

understanding of the time that the Mexican immigrants were only bodies capable of labor and they therefore did not need protection under the law.

Of the many promises agreed to by representatives of both the Mexican and American governments, the first provision of the 1942 agreement stated that no contracted Mexican national (Bracero) can be recruited for any aspect of military service.⁶⁵ Representatives agreed to include this provision due to the mutual understanding that Mexico's contribution to the war effort would not be in terms of soldiers or military support, but rather in terms of labor. Despite this provision, however, several military recruiting centers throughout the United States attempted to enlist Mexican nationals into the armed forces with the false promise of citizenship upon their return from war.⁶⁶

This incident sparked concern on the part of the Mexican government, as well as that of the United States. The U.S. Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, requested an investigation into this incident and found that these recruiting centers did not have legal jurisdiction to grant American citizenship to Mexican nationals, and that Mexican nationals should not be attempting to attain citizenship. The investigative report stated that, "The War Department does not compel noncitizen soldiers to act in these respects. Persons who take the oath of enlistment, the oath prescribed for inductees, or the oath contained in the petition for naturalization are not recognized as naturalized solely by virtue of such action." Following this report, Secretary of State Hull issued a statement

⁶⁵ 56-Stat-1766.

⁶⁶ U.S. Congress. House. *Foreign relations of the United States. Diplomatic papers, 1943. Volume VI. The American republics*. 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1943, H. Doc. 811, vol. 6. p. 396-397.

calling attention to the fact that “members of the armed forces can only be naturalized in the United States by a court authorized to naturalize aliens.”⁶⁷ Although this mishap did not cause any tangible damage to the newly formed Bracero Program, it did cause the Mexican government to be suspicious of American intentions, in addition to blatantly defying the first provision of the agreement itself. In response to this situation, Mexican president Avila Camacho released a statement to the Mexican periodical, *La Prensa* stating that, “Mexico is cooperating in the same plan that it promised to do although the war is receding farther and farther away from our Continent everyday...Mexico, consequently, will not send men to the war...our obligation up to now continues to be production.”⁶⁸ Although Mexico acknowledged this issue as a concern, it was not enough to deter Mexico from upholding its commitment to contribute to the war effort.

The second provision within the Bracero agreement of 1942, although relevant on paper, was less enforceable and supported in reality. This provision states that “Mexicans entering the United States as a result of this understanding shall not suffer discriminatory acts of any kind in accordance with the Executive Order No. 8802 issued at the White House June 25, 1941.”⁶⁹ The Executive Order No. 8802, signed by FDR on June 25, 1941 stated that, “All departments and agencies of the Government of the United States concerned with vocational and training programs for defense production shall take special

⁶⁷ U.S. Congress. House. *Foreign relations of the United States. Diplomatic papers, 1943. Volume VI. The American republics.* 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1943, H. Doc. 811, vol. 6. p. 397.

⁶⁸ U.S. Congress. House. *Foreign relations of the United States. Diplomatic papers, 1943. Volume VI. The American republics.* 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1943, H. Doc. 811, vol. 6.p. 397.

⁶⁹ 56-Stat-1759

measures appropriate to assure that such programs are administered without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”⁷⁰ The order then stated that all wartime contracting agencies were required to follow this same principle. This order also created the Committee on Fair Employment Practice within the Office of Production Management. This committee was supposed to “recommend to the several departments and agencies of the Government of the United States and to the President all measures which may be deemed by it necessary or proper to effectuate the provisions of this order.”⁷¹ However, despite this provision, many Bracero workers experienced harsh discrimination from their employers. This resulted in some instances of animosity between the Braceros and the farmers they worked for; however, the economic needs of the Bracero generally outweighed the ever-present discrimination and poor conditions. These scenarios indicate problems that both the Mexican and American governments faced regarding the implementation of state-sponsored programs; and although the Mexican and American governments succeeded in establishing the Bracero Program agreement on paper, that did not guarantee that on the ground level the Bracero Program would function. Nor did it mean that authorities had the necessary infrastructure required to ensure complete enforcement of the Bracero agreement provisions.

In addition to the lack of enforcement that the first two provisions faced, provision three of the agreement of 1942, promising to provide Mexicans with “transportation,

⁷⁰ Executive Order no. 8802, *Code of Federal Regulations*, title 3, p.957 (1938-1943 Compilation).

⁷¹ Executive Order no. 8802, *Code of Federal Regulations*, title 3, p. 957 (1938-1943 Compilation).

living expenses and repatriation,” also faced difficulties with enforcement.⁷² Other provisions included the legal framework for Bracero contracts. Provision number four, which stated that no Bracero worker could knowingly take the place of a domestic worker for the purpose of “reducing rates of pay,” was difficult to uphold due to insufficient enforcement on the ground level.⁷³ This agreement also determined that all contracts would be written in Spanish under the supervision of representatives from the Mexican government, and although this practice was more strenuously followed, it did lead to certain problems of miscommunication between all parties involved. These contracts, however, also led to other possibly unforeseen consequences for the Bracero workers.

These contracts, written in Spanish, would represent the interests of three parties including the “worker,” representing the Mexican farm laborer, the “employer” representing the Farm Security Administration within the Department of Agriculture, and the “sub-employer” representing the owner or operator of American farms.⁷⁴ By legally contracting individual Mexican citizens to do work for a government agency that claimed to represent American farmers, the American government essentially created a system whereby the Mexican nationals had no legal voice with which to argue or defend their interests and rights.

This 1942 Bracero Program Agreement also outlined requirements and

⁷² 56-Stat-1759. This provision stated that Article 29 of the Mexican Labor Law protected these guarantees. Article 29 of the Mexican Labor Law states that, “ It shall be unlawful to use persons less than eighteen years of age for the furnishing of services outside of the Republic, except in the case of technicians, professionals, artists, athletes or, in general, specialized workers.”

⁷³ 56-Stat-1759.

⁷⁴ 56-Stat-1759.

stipulations that the Mexican nationals needed to meet in order to be eligible to participate in the program. In order to be admitted into the program, Mexican health authorities required that all Mexican nationals pass certain physical examinations and be in good physical health. In theory, the Mexican and American governments included this requirement in the agreement for sanitary and international health precautions; however, these examinations became a means by which to judge, exclude and discriminate against Mexican nationals on the basis of their physical condition. In most instances recruiting officials first quickly examined the hands of applicants looking for rough calloused hands as proof of their experience with manual labor.⁷⁵ The image below depicts an instance of this preliminary screening.



“At the Selection Unit typists initiated forms for workers. The men were questioned about their agricultural experience. A preliminary examination was made for calluses on their hands and other indications of agricultural work.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ University of California, “Agricultural Personnel Management Program: Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources,” *Labor Management Decisions* vol. 3 no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1993).
http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/gallery.html.

⁷⁶ University of California, “Agricultural Personnel Management Program,”
http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/gallery.html.

Other elements within the recruiting process were equally discriminatory and in many cases more degrading. The following image illustrates part of the humiliating contracting process that most Braceros experienced at recruiting centers throughout Mexico.



“Medical staff included doctors from both the U.S. and Mexican Federal Health Departments. Examination went from head to toe.”⁷⁷

Images such as these indicate how government officials inspected all Mexican nationals in terms of their bodies’ physical condition under the pretext of health. These procedures are evidence of the many ways in which American authority figures viewed and judged Mexican nationals along stereotypical lines established and supported by the federal government.

Other general provisions of the 1942 agreement included guarantees relating to adequate housing and sanitary facilities. These pieces of the agreement were supposed to protect Bracero workers from dismal living conditions by providing that “housing

⁷⁷ University of California, “Agricultural Personnel Management Program.” http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/gallery.html.

conditions, sanitary and medical services enjoyed by workers admitted under this understanding shall be identical to those enjoyed by other agricultural workers in the same locality.”⁷⁸ Although this provision entitled Mexican Braceros to equal housing and sanitary conditions, most Braceros lived in dismal surroundings and lacked sufficient medical treatment. The experiences of Alberto Mendoza Torres sheds light on how uncomfortable this situation was for some Braceros.

Alberto Mendoza Torres worked as a Bracero picking strawberries in California and later Colorado and he experienced first hand the problems associated with the non-enforcement of the medical treatment provision. Through a personal interview conducted with support from the University of Texas, El Paso, Mr. Torres recounted his experience of becoming ill from the food served in his Bracero mess hall.

After contracting a stomach flu from eating poorly cooked eggs, Mr. Torres continued to work although he hadn’t received any medical attention. Since he did not receive any medical attention, he asked the farmer he worked for to send him back to Mexico so that he could attend to his health. After working an additional fifteen days, the farmer finally agreed to release Mr. Torres from his contract so that he could return home to Huatecolco, Cuernavaca to seek medical attention. Upon returning home, Mr. Torres remained sick for six months and lost a considerable amount of weight due to the fact that he was unable to eat without agonizing abdominal pain. After visiting a homeopathic doctor in Huatecolco, his health began to improve; however, he remains frustrated to this day about the way his employer in Colorado did not acknowledge his medical condition,

⁷⁸ 56-Stat-175.

even though his Bracero contract guaranteed him access to medical services.⁷⁹ This case highlights one of the ways in which the American government and the farmers they represented failed, or chose not to enforce, many of the initial provisions within the Bracero Program agreement of 1942. This case also illustrates poor planning on the part of government officials and a lack of infrastructure necessary to guarantee contractual rights to participating Braceros. The lack of enforcement of these provisions also showcases how an attempt at alleviating a labor shortage in the United States ultimately failed due to the multiple broken promises and the inability of the American government and American farmers to resolve the problems associated with this program.

The United States and Mexico originally created the Bracero Program as an emergency wartime relief effort with the understanding that this program would become unnecessary with the end of the war.⁸⁰ When the war ended in 1945, however, the Bracero Program did not lapse. In fact, both countries agreed to extend the program until December 31, 1947.⁸¹ They argued that because of a worldwide food shortage that still existed, the program was warranted.⁸² Historians have also cited the creation of the G.I.

⁷⁹ Violeta Dominguez, "Oral History Interview with Alberto Mendoza Torres," in Heritage West, Item #55845, <http://heritagewest.coalition.org/items/show/55845>, Accessed at <http://hdl.handle.net/10176/UTEPmor07>

⁸⁰ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 47.

⁸¹ U.S. Congress. House. *Farm supply program. February 24, 1947. -- Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the State of the Union and ordered to be printed.* 80th Cong., 1st sess., February 24, 1947, H. Rpt. 70. This document chronicles the reasons why the program was not extended passed December 31, 1947. Firstly they cited that the funding for the recruitment and transportation of Bracero laborers was scheduled to expire with the expiration of Public Law 45, which had allocated 26 million dollars to the implementation of the program.

⁸² Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 42. The original agreement did under go some minor changed in 1943, but these amendments did not change the any of the original provisions.

Bill of 1944 as a reason why the United States did not end the original Bracero Program.⁸³

Among the many provisions within the G.I. Bill, the second provision provided funding for education in the way of tuition, books, fee, and a stipend for living expenses for returning war veterans. This bill allowed a large majority of the returning veterans to seek higher education as opposed to returning to do manual agricultural labor, and U.S. farmers argued that because of this phenomenon, there continued to be labor shortages and the need for Bracero workers. Due to these arguments, Mexico and the United States agreed to discuss a possibly extending the Bracero Program past December 31, 1947.

The second phase of the Bracero Program began in January 1948 and lasted until July 1951. Although the agreements that would emerge during this phase of the program were very similar to those of the Bracero Agreement of 1942, they were markedly different in one respect.⁸⁴ Unlike the agreement of 1942, that entrusted the recruiting and processing of Bracero workers to the United States government, the Bracero agreements of March and April, 1947, February 1948 and August 1949 gave the full responsibility of recruiting to the farmer or his “representative.”⁸⁵ Although the responsibility of recruiting had shifted, it did not mean that the process became less humiliating for the Bracero or any easier for the farmer. Before farmers were able to recruit Braceros, they first had to get certification from the Department of Labor stating that there was indeed a labor

⁸³ Committee on World War Veterans’ Legislation, House of Representative, “Statement of Benefits Provided by So-called G.I. Bill,” S. 1767, 78th Congress, 1-4.

⁸⁴ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 51-53.

⁸⁵ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 53. Although the United States was no longer fully responsible for recruiting, farmers still worked “in cooperation with Mexican and American authorities to perform this task..”

shortage in their areas. The fact that this certification came from the Department of Labor, rather than the Department of Agriculture, which was responsible for certifying labor shortages prior to 1947 shows a shift in responsibility. This shift of responsibility is significant in that it shows an attempt by the United States to correct its prior mistakes regarding their perceptions of Mexicans as commodities rather than workers. This shift of power was a step made by the United States to reverse previous decisions about Mexican laborers; however, any gains made through this decision were quickly lost because of alterations made to the provisions of the 1948 and 1949 Bracero Agreements.

These two agreements removed or drastically changed many of the privileges that the 1942 Agreement granted Braceros.⁸⁶ The 1948 Agreement specifically removed clauses that stipulated a competitive minimum wage, and a minimum piece-rate guarantee.⁸⁷ The 1949 Agreement also removed the provision requiring employers to invest 10 percent of the Bracero's salary into a savings plan.⁸⁸ The removal of these provisions did nothing to improve the situation of Bracero workers, but rather made their experiences worse than before; however, despite the worsened working conditions, Mexican nationals still saw an opportunity to make more money than they otherwise would have in Mexico. With the conclusion of the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government had made an effort to improve everyday conditions for Mexican citizens by

⁸⁶ As I argued previously, the 1942 Agreement theoretically granted Braceros rights and privileges, however, U.S. and Mexican authorities and American farmers usually did not enforce or uphold these provisions, yielding them virtually useless.

⁸⁷ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 54. A piece-rate guarantee is a means of determining a wage. Usually a wage is determined for each unit of production at a fixed rate. This wage is pre-determined by the employer.

⁸⁸ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 54.

expanding the industrial sector of the economy. However, they paid little attention and offered even less assistance to the agricultural sector. For this reason many Mexican nationals, despite the new pro-farmer Bracero Agreements, continued to clamor for Bracero contracts.⁸⁹ However, international politics would soon intervene and create an opportunity for Mexico and the United States to draft a new agreement regarding Mexican labor.

On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces invaded and quickly overtook South Korea.⁹⁰ The invasion and attack of North Korea, and the Korean War that followed, acted as catalysts for reworking the Bracero Program in much of the same way that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor triggered the creation of the first Bracero Program agreement in 1942. The legislation that followed was S. 984, which amended the Agricultural Act of 1949.⁹¹ Through subsequent amendment this piece of legislation became Public Law 78 and the cornerstone legal document for the third phase of the Bracero Program.⁹²

Like its predecessors, this piece of legislation reflected the interests of both Mexico and the United States. However, unlike its immediate predecessor, Public Law 78

⁸⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 60. The number of would-be Bracero's did not decline despite these new agreements. Rather, the number of Braceros who worked in the United States between 1948 and 1951 exceeded the numbers of the wartime Bracero Program, 1942-1947. The number of workers, however, continually exceeded the number of available Bracero contracts, which led to a spike in illegal immigration. This dynamic is discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

⁹⁰ Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900*, 186-190.

⁹¹ 63-Stat-1051.

⁹² Congress sent S.984 to the White House on July 2, 1951. President Truman signed it into law on July 13, 1951. After meeting with Mexican officials in August 1951, the U.S. congress amended Public Law 78 to include the 1951 accords. These pieces of legislation together would become the legal framework for the Bracero Program from 1952-1964, although these agreements were updated and extended every two years.

returned the responsibility of recruiting to U.S. government agencies.⁹³ The U.S. government, under pressure from Mexico, also agreed to make a more ardent effort at enforcing the provisions of this piece of legislation. Public Law 78 also authorized the construction of processing and reception centers along the Mexican border, rather than in the interior of Mexico. American authorities argued that having these facilities closer to the American border would facilitate in the transportation of Braceros to their respective employers.⁹⁴ Public Law 78 also had stronger language aimed at curtailing the abuses regarding mistreatment and discrimination that the previous agreements lacked.⁹⁵ Also, P.L. 78 denied Bracero contracts to employers who had knowingly hired illegal “wetbacks.”⁹⁶ However, along side these provisions, Public Law 78 also had a clause regarding the funding of this program.

In previous Bracero agreements of 1942-1949 the United States set aside appropriations to fund the recruiting of Braceros and other processes associated with the program. Public Law 78, however, did not include separate legislation regarding funding. Instead P.L. 78 included provisions that required American farmers to “indemnify the United States for any losses; to reimburse the government for essential expenses of the program, not to exceed fifteen dollars per worker, and to pay the government a sum...in

⁹³ 65-Stat-119.

⁹⁴ The construction of reception centers along the border was a cause of great concern for Mexico. They believed that the proximity of these centers coupled with the large number of Mexican nationals unable to secure a contract would result in an increase in illegal immigration, which did in fact happen. These phenomenon will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

⁹⁵ 65-Stat-119.

⁹⁶ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 74.

cases where workers were not returned to the reception center as provided in the contract.”⁹⁷ These clauses essentially made farmers financially liable to the government in exchange for participation in the program and access to Bracero labor. In other words, Public Law 78 required farmers to *pay for* their Braceros in addition to *paying* their Braceros. Public Law 78 basically put farmers in the business of renting the services of their Braceros.⁹⁸ This reading of P.L 78 draws directly from previous arguments regarding how political language within Bracero-related government documents created an atmosphere where exploitation and mistreatment of Bracero workers ran rampant despite promises to protect the legal and civil rights of these Mexican nationals.

The United States and Mexico extended and updated Public Law 78 and the Bracero Program Agreement of 1951 in 1953, 1955, 1958, and every year between 1960 and 1963. However, these amendments did little to change the core provisions of the 1951 agreement. These amendments also were unsuccessful in revising the groundwork of the 1942 agreement or any subsequent agreement. The United States and Mexico, over the course of twenty-two years, did, however, succeed in creating a system whereby Mexican nationals were scrutinized and judged based on their bodies’ ability to do manual labor. These agreements also succeeded in perpetuating negative stereotypes and strengthening false preconceived notions about Mexicans. Due to the lack of enforcement of the provisions within these agreements, many Mexican nationals worked in dismal conditions with little or no means of improving their circumstances. Within the

⁹⁷ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 73.

⁹⁸ David Bacon, “Immigrant Workers Ask Labor ‘Which Side Are You On?’” *WorkingUSA* vol.3 no.5 (January, February 2000): 15. Some harsh critics of the Bracero Program go a step farther than the concept of “renting” and claim that the Bracero Program was an institutionalized version of “legalized slavery.”

documents and correspondences associated with the Bracero Program, discriminate and ambiguous language indirectly encouraged acts of mistreatment of Bracero workers. More importantly, however, this language coupled with the lack of enforcement of the agreements' protectionist provisions, directly undermined the success of the Bracero Program and left a legacy of a failed international attempt to alleviate a national problem.

Chapter Two

Parallel Paths: The Influence and Effect of Illegal Immigration During the Bracero Program, 1942-1964.

Between the years 1942 and 1964, the United States and Mexico entered into various agreements designed to alleviate agricultural labor shortages within the United States. These agreements, collectively known as the Bracero Program, were also a means through which millions of Mexican farm laborers traveled legally into the United States to work. During this same time period, however, the illegal immigration of millions of Mexican nationals into the United States also occurred with the utmost frequency. This phenomenon of illegal immigration directly paralleled the legal immigration of contracted Braceros.⁹⁹ The impact of illegal immigration during the entirety of the Bracero Program, 1942 to 1964, ultimately aided in undermining the success of the Bracero Program by creating competition between Braceros and illegal Mexican workers - often times referred to as Wetbacks¹⁰⁰ - while at the same time perpetuating another negative stereotype, that of Mexicans as criminals. The presence of illegal Mexican laborers also negatively affected the perception of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in general, and the American sentiment towards the legally contracted Bracero workers specifically.

Although the issue of illegal Mexican immigration existed in the United States prior to 1942, it wasn't until the creation of the Bracero Program that many American

⁹⁹ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943-1954." *Western Historical Quarterly* vol. 37 (Winter 2006): 423-426.

¹⁰⁰ The term wetback refers to Mexican national who crossed the Rio Grande to gain illegal access to the United States. The concept was later expanded to include all immigrants who entered the United States illegally by crossing the U.S.-Mexican border.

politicians viewed the unrestrained and unlawful exodus of Mexican nationals across the U.S.-Mexico border as a real problem.¹⁰¹ Prior to the 1920s, many Mexican nationals were able to cross the border into the United States with relatively little trouble; however, the creation of the Border Patrol within Immigration and Naturalization Services¹⁰² and the implementation of this service in the 1940s forced the United States government to reevaluate the threat of an un-patrolled and unsecured border with Mexico.¹⁰³

The United States originally created the Border Patrol under INS within the Department of Labor. It initially attempted to curtail illegal immigration of European and Asian immigrants who were bypassing the quota system of the 1924 Immigration Act by gaining access to the United States through Canada.¹⁰⁴ The United States then commissioned the Border Patrol to protect northern and southern borders against certain contraband, especially the importation of alcohol during the prohibition era. During the 1930's the Border Patrol played a relatively small role in protecting the southern border with Mexico, and an even smaller role in repatriating Mexican nationals during the Depression.¹⁰⁵ In 1940, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt suggested that the Border Patrol and the INS be transferred to the Department of Justice, due to fears that the Axis powers would attempt to breach U.S. security through its southern border with Mexico. It

¹⁰¹ Juan Ramon Garcia, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 106-108.

¹⁰² Herein after referred to as INS.

¹⁰³ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 106-108.

¹⁰⁴ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 106-109.

¹⁰⁵ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 106-108.

wasn't until the mid-1940's that the Border Patrol began to function, although ineffectively, as an agency responsible for protecting the U.S.-Mexico border by attempting to prevent the crossing of illegal Mexican nationals into the United States.¹⁰⁶

There was also a growing concern on the part of the Mexican government regarding the untamed and seemingly uncontrollable exodus of illegal Mexican nationals to the United States. In addition to the points mentioned earlier regarding Mexico's reasons for agreeing to participate in the Bracero Program, the Mexican government also hoped that the presence of such a temporary guest-worker program would create a legal pathway for Mexican nationals to travel into the United States to work, thereby eliminating the flow of "wetbacks" into the United States.¹⁰⁷ In retrospect, this conclusion could not have been farther from reality. There have been multiple studies indicating how the presence of the Bracero Program encouraged illegal immigration in many ways.¹⁰⁸

One of the reasons for the increase in illegal immigration during the Bracero Program years directly relates to the outrageous number of Mexican nationals who hoped to participate in the Bracero Program. In reality, there were only so many Bracero contracts available, and yet the number of applicants constantly exceeded this number. Correspondence between Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, and the American Ambassador to Mexico, George Messersmith, illustrates the extent to which Mexican nationals clamored to participate in the Bracero Program. Messersmith, commenting on the

¹⁰⁶ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 106-108.

¹⁰⁷ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 35-36.

¹⁰⁸ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 64.

recruiting process in Mexico City in January of 1943 writes, “Our Farm Security people engaged in recruiting agricultural laborers are somewhat embarrassed by the fact that 5000 laborers are applying for approximately 1000 jobs presently being filled.”¹⁰⁹

Although the disproportionate numbers are staggering, the visual image of this situation is equally, if not more shocking. In the image below, thousands of Mexican workers wait outside of the stadium in Mexico City, hoping for a contract through the Bracero Program. These men were simply hoping for an opportunity to work legally in the United States through the Bracero Program in order to make enough money to support their families in Mexico.



“These men had learned through newspapers and word of mouth about the opportunity to work in the United States. Many had been standing for five days and five nights when the photo was taken.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Congress. House. *Foreign relations of the United States. Diplomatic papers, 1943. Volume VI. The American republics.* 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1943, H. Doc. 811, vol. 6.p. 531.

¹¹⁰ Originally printed by University of California, “Agricultural Personnel Management Program: Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources,” *Labor Management Decisions* vol. 3 no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1993). http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/gallery.html.

Another detriment to the success of the Bracero Program that also affected the increased flow of illegal migration, was the practice of bribery. Scholar Juan Ramon Garcia illustrates one way that Mexican nationals used the “mordida” or bribe in order to secure a Bracero contract and gain legal access to the United States.¹¹¹ One of the reasons bribery was so common, aside from the historic and cultural use of bribery in Mexico, was the fact that paying a mordida sometimes guaranteed a contract to a Mexican national who had already invested a great deal of time and money in trying to secure a Bracero contract.¹¹² Bribery, for those who could afford it, was a way to succeed in securing a contract; however, it also led to two major consequences that seriously undermined the legality and implementation of the Bracero Program.

Firstly, for those Mexican nationals who could not afford to pay the bribe, yet had wasted time and resources to travel to a recruiting center, returning home was not an option. Faced with this scenario, it made sense for many Mexican nationals to continue on their journey to the United States and cross the border without a secured contract in hand, hopeful that they would find work in the United States. This practice therefore greatly increased the number of Mexicans coming into the United States without proper documentation.¹¹³ Secondly, the acceptance and widespread use of bribery by low-level Mexican officials legally undermined the Bracero Program. This presence of bribery

¹¹¹ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 35-37.

¹¹² Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 35-37.

¹¹³ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 35-37.

within the recruiting process proves that the Bracero Program lacked sufficient supervision within its ranks, however, and more importantly it is evidence of inadequate infrastructure needed to operate this program effectively and efficiently.

In addition to the ways in which inadequate infrastructure led to illegal immigration, the Bracero Program also began operating without first establishing sufficient policing forces to monitor the border. This contributed to the creation of an atmosphere where illegal border crossings happened relatively frequently. Although the United States government created the Border Patrol in the 1920s, its main purpose at that time was not to prevent the illegal crossing of Mexican immigrants into the United States.¹¹⁴ By the 1940's, however, the patrol's objective changed and focused more on illegal Mexican immigration. According to the Mexican government, however, this U.S. Border Patrol's policing efforts were not doing enough to curb the flow of illegal immigration of Mexican nationals into the United States. As mentioned earlier, the permanent loss of Mexican nationals was one of Mexico's greatest concerns¹¹⁵ and the inability of U.S. policing agencies to alleviate this problem created serious tension between the Mexican and American governments.¹¹⁶

On December 11, 1943, the Mexican Embassy wrote to the U.S. Secretary of State

¹¹⁴ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 36-38.

¹¹⁵ Hernandez, "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal immigration," 425. There were a variety of reasons that contributed to Mexico's growing concern over the exodus of its citizens to the United States. These reasons were based in the assumption that many countries around the world would view this exodus as evidence of the failure of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, and as the inability of the Mexican government to provide adequate opportunities for economic, political and social mobility of its citizens. Mexico was also aware of how illegal immigration was draining the country of one of its most sought after resources, "cheap and flexible labor."

¹¹⁶ Hernandez, "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration," 421- 429.

and publicly requested that the United States “adopt the measures which may be appropriate to prevent illegal entry of Mexican workers [into the United States] not in possession of Bracero contracts.”¹¹⁷ This request followed efforts made by the Mexican government to increase the numbers and efficiency of their own border patrol personnel. To show the urgency of this situation, Mexico then warned the United States that if they did not take action to reduce the number of illegal entries into the United States and increase the numbers of deportations to Mexico that the Mexican government would “affect a complete revision of the Bracero agreement.”¹¹⁸ On December 12, 1943, in response to this threat a representative from the U.S. Department of State, J.F. McGurk, issued a statement acknowledging the severity of the problem and the United States commitment to alleviate all of Mexico’s concerns.¹¹⁹

The State Department considers it desirable to cooperate in this respect with the Mexican Government in every appropriate manner, and any steps which the Immigration and Naturalization Service may take to maintain or to extend its vigilance to prevent clandestine and illegal entry of Mexican workers into the United States will insure the continuance of these important Bracero agreements and will therefore rebound to the benefit of both Governments.¹²⁰

This statement illustrates the extent to which the United States valued the Bracero Program. They understood the importance of the program for the agricultural sector of the economy and for the war effort, and at the same time they understood the necessity of

¹¹⁷ Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 427-428.

¹¹⁸ Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 428.

¹¹⁹ Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 428.

¹²⁰ Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 428.

fostering good relations with Mexico. Therefore they agreed to increase their efforts to secure the southern border. However, this incident more importantly illustrates how illegal immigration was a problem that hindered the success of the Bracero Program from very early on. Many historians cite the problem of illegal immigration during the 1950s as reason for the demise of the Bracero Program; however, illegal immigration occurred throughout the entire lifespan of the Bracero Program. Larger-scale problems associated with illegal immigration that occurred after later years of the Bracero Program are firmly rooted in instances of illegal immigration that occurred during the early years of the program. This is a prime example of just how serious illegal immigration was for both the Mexican and American governments and for the development of the Bracero Program.

This situation also led the U.S. Border Patrol to begin intentionally targeting Mexicans in an attempt to increase the number of deported illegal immigrants. As part of this effort, the U.S. Border Patrol began an “intensive drive on Mexican aliens” by creating “Special Mexican Deportation Parties,” which consisted of small groups of Border Patrol personnel instructed to “target, apprehend and deport undocumented Mexican nationals.”¹²¹ These types of campaigns continued to develop and grow throughout the 1940s and 1950s, eventually influencing the creation of Operation Wetback of 1954; and while at times these campaigns were successful in deporting illegal immigrants, they did not alleviate the problem of illegal entry.¹²²

¹²¹ Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 428.

¹²² Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 429-431. The U.S. Border Patrol deported thousands of Mexican nationals by removing them from the interior of the United States to the U.S.-Mexican border. But many of these people would simply return to the U.S. illegally the next day. Therefore U.S. officials began working more directly with Mexican officials, and deportees were deported

Although the presence of wetbacks was very detrimental to the Braceros, the Border Patrol's efforts of rounding up "Mexicans" had equally dire consequences for the Mexican-Americans and for legally contracted Bracero workers. Through the media coverage of policing and deportation campaigns, such as the one listed above, the American public began to view anyone of Mexican descent as criminal. This created an atmosphere that was not only dangerous for Mexican Braceros but it also led to discrimination and a complete lack of appreciation for legally contracted Bracero workers. These efforts also created situations that were not conducive for the successful existence of the Bracero Program.

Other instances of illegal border crossings directly affected the wages and experiences of contracted Braceros. Once such incident occurred in Texas in 1948 when recruiting began for the fall harvest of cotton. The Texas growers, weary of U.S. government regulations, intentionally created a situation that resulted in the illegal crossing of six thousand non-contracted Mexican migrant workers to pick cotton. When Mexican officials learned that Texas growers were only going to grant Bracero workers \$2.50 per hundred pounds of cotton, instead of the \$3.00 per hundred pounds which was the prevailing rate, Mexico discouraged contracting with Texas as a means of "protecting

to central Mexico via train. There are many reports of these deportees jumping off of the trains, however. Some sources say that men would jump if they were close to their hometowns, rather than being stranded in Central Mexico. Others say that people jumped to avoid punishment by the Mexican authorities. These train, and later airlift, however were expensive, and could not keep up with the flow of illegal immigrants into the United States, and therefore these programs were not very successful.

their nationals from what it considered extremely offensive local customs.”¹²³ This situation then led Texas growers and U.S. immigration officials to spread rumors of available work, essentially encouraging illegal immigration. It is estimated that Texas growers paid these illegal immigrants no more than \$1.50 per hundred pounds of cotton, half of the initial wage.¹²⁴ After the picking, the immigration officials arrested these illegal wetback workers, seeing as they were aware of their illegal status. This is an example of how American farmers encouraged illegal immigration as a means of keeping their costs low; however, it completely undermined the Bracero Program and any efforts made by the Border Patrol to limit or discourage illegal immigration. Cases such as this also illustrate how American farmers acted without understanding or concern for the consequences of their actions.

Despite efforts made by both the American and Mexican border officials, the flow of illegal immigrants continued to grow throughout the remainder of the 1940s and through the early 1950s. Every year between 1949 and 1954 the number of apprehended illegal wetbacks exceeded the number of legally contracted Braceros. The numbers for each year are staggering, and prove that the efforts of the Border Patrol did not come close to fixing the problem of illegal immigration, but rather weakened the integrity of the Bracero Program.¹²⁵ This trend caused great concern for both the Mexican and American

¹²³ Ernesto Galarza. *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (San Jose, California: The Rosicrucian Press, 1964), 46-47, 50.

¹²⁴ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 50.

¹²⁵ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 58. The statistics for these years are as follows. 1949: 107,000 Braceros and 278,538 Wetbacks. 1950: 67,500 Braceros and 458,215 Wetbacks. 1951: 192,000 Braceros and 500,628 Wetbacks. 1952: 197,100 Braceros and 543,538 Wetbacks. 1953: 201,380 Braceros and 875,318 Wetbacks. 1954: 309,033 Braceros and 1,075,168 Wetbacks. Statistics originally printed in “Long-Term

governments and for that reason the United States took a radical approach and created a national immigration program, called “Operation Wetback” aimed at apprehending and deporting mass numbers of illegal Mexican immigrants.¹²⁶ The architect of Operation Wetback, U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell, modeled this national program after the smaller scale deportation efforts of Border Patrol Inspector, Albert Quillin of South Texas.¹²⁷ In 1950, Quillin started using a new strategy whereby he and a group of twelve Border Patrol officers and a small convoy of vehicles set up temporary immigration checkpoints on the outskirts of small cities and towns in Texas. Each day they would choose a different location and attempt to apprehend wetbacks. At the end of the first four days of using this strategy they apprehended over 1,000 illegal Mexican nationals.¹²⁸ After Brownell borrowed and enlarged Quillin’s initial idea, he appointed Joseph M. Swing as Commissioner of Immigration and charged him with the implementation and planning of Operation Wetback.

Swing’s first step towards implementing Operation Wetback was to reorganize the U.S. Border Patrol in order to make it more efficient and affective.¹²⁹ Then Swing organized a special commission that he charged with designing the elements of the program. This commission included three veteran Border Patrol officers, Charles Kirk,

trends in Foreign-Worker Employment: Table 3, Foreign Workers Admitted for Temporary Employment in U.S. Agriculture,” *Farm Labor Developments* (February 1968): p.10.

¹²⁶ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 169.

¹²⁷ Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 440.

¹²⁸ Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration,” 441.

¹²⁹ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 173.

G.J. McNee and John P. Swanson. Swing entrusted them with the task of developing “Mobile Task Forces.” These forces would be small mobile units of patrol officers responsible for monitoring areas and corridors with high concentrations of wetbacks.¹³⁰ They would begin massive round-ups of “illegal” aliens with the hopes that those illegal immigrants who were not captured would voluntarily return to Mexico out of fear.¹³¹

In May of 1954, after the commission finished developing a blueprint for Operation Wetback, representatives from the U.S Departments of State, Labor and INS met with officials from the Border Patrol and representatives from Mexico. They agreed that Operation Wetback would begin in earnest on June 1, 1954¹³² and would focus primarily in California and Arizona.¹³³ They also agreed that the first round of deportees, apprehended through a series of road blocks, would be “bus-lifted” to the U.S.-Mexican border, where upon arrival the Mexican authorities would organize and implement “train-lifts” bound for central Mexico.¹³⁴ After the first day of round-ups, Border Patrol officers delivered more than 1,000 illegal Mexican immigrants on 72 Greyhound buses to Mexican officials at the border.

¹³⁰ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 174.

¹³¹ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 177. U.S. media coverage only heightened fear felt by many illegal Mexican immigrants because the coverage “aided in creating an increasingly hostile environment against illegals.” This media situation also created in the minds of the American public that these illegal immigrants were criminal “invaders.” For this reason, the majority of the American public was in support of Operation Wetback. This atmosphere also threatened the safety and wellbeing of legally hired Bracero workers, due to the fact that most media coverage did not make an effort of separating the two.

¹³² Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 175-178. Due to complications regarding Mexico’s agreement to provide adequate facilities for holding deportees, Operation Wetback did not commence until June 10, 1954.

¹³³ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 183.

¹³⁴ The Mexican and American authorities decided to remove all deportees to Central Mexico with the hopes that it would deter immediate re-crossing.

Interestingly enough, the Mexican government completely supported this operation despite their stance on previous U.S.-driven deportation campaigns. Historian Juan Ramon Garcia describes Mexico's sentiments regarding Operation Wetback.

The Mexican government fully approved of the planned roundup. It had advocated and demanded that the United States do something to control the border. While it would have preferred that the action be in the form of penalty legislation against employers, it nonetheless viewed the operation as a positive step in the right direction. Mexican officials were more than happy to let the United States assume the initiative, responsibility, expense and onus of controlling the border.¹³⁵

Other groups within the United States also supported these measures. The American G.I. Forum of Austin Texas is one prime example. In a report compiled in June of 1953, titled *What Price Wetback?* the forum urged the United States government to take action against the flood of wetbacks entering the United States. They argued that the presence of these illegal immigrants caused a multitude of problems affecting the U.S. economy, national security and health, and living and working conditions of Americans and Braceros.¹³⁶

Newspapers across the country also commented and reported on the negative effects of the wetback phenomenon. Journalist Gladwin Hillel wrote an article for the New York Times in 1954 titled, "Two Every Minute Across the Border: Mexican "Wetbacks" Continue to Invade the U.S. in an Unending - and Uncontrollable -

¹³⁵ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 175.

¹³⁶ American G.I Forum, Texas State Federation of Labor, "What Price Wetbacks?" (Austin TX: Allied Printing Trades Council, June 1953): 1-3.

Stream.”¹³⁷ In this article, Hillel noted how the presence of wetbacks caused considerable damage for Mexican-American and Bracero workers. Hillel reported that many farmers were unable to distinguish between legal Bracero, wetback or Mexican-American citizens. This caused confusion among growers and created a sense of competition among Braceros and wetbacks. Hillel states that the presence of wetbacks during the Bracero Program created competition that was a “vicious economic circle that had been turning ever since Mexicans were imported on a large scale during the World War II manpower shortage.”¹³⁸ In addition to reporting on the damages caused by wetbackism, this article also alluded to the consequences of illegal immigration within a temporary-guest worker system. Hillel explained that, “the availability of migratory and particularly wetback labor demonstrably depresses wage levels.” Since these wetbacks were willing to work for cheaper wages farmers did not feel pressured to pay contracted Braceros the “prevailing wage.”¹³⁹ This then led farmers to choose wetback labor over legally contracted Bracero labor which drastically undermined the program and created dismal living and working conditions for both legal and illegal Mexican laborers alike.

The presence of such a large number of illegal immigrants during the Bracero Program made the American public weary of any government programs related to Mexican laborers. This caused great concern for American farmers, due to the fact that

¹³⁷ Gladwin Hillel, “Two Every Minute Across the Border: Mexican “Wetbacks” Continue to Invade The U.S. in an Unending - and Uncontrollable - Stream,” *The New York Times* (January 31, 1954): SM13, 41-42.

¹³⁸ Hillel, “Two Every Minute Across the Border,” 41.

¹³⁹ Hillel, “Two Every Minute Across the Border,” 41-42.

they depended on this labor. The American media coverage of this phenomenon also fostered a feeling of weariness and uncertainty due to the fact that many media sources depicted Mexicans as criminal.¹⁴⁰ In an effort to ease or restrict the illegal immigration that threatened the success of the Bracero Program, the United States implemented a national program aimed at apprehending and deporting wetbacks. Although Operation Wetback succeeded in removing more than one million illegal Mexican workers, this program did not seriously address the ease through which Mexicans entered the country illegally. For this reason illegal immigration continued to plague the success of the Bracero Program until the program's termination in 1964.

¹⁴⁰ Multiple articles from the *New York Times*, *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, indicate this trend between 1949 and 1964.

Conclusion:

The Bracero Program of 1942-1964 affected the lives of nearly 5 million Mexican nationals and millions of American farmers. The program, originally designed as a wartime emergency relief effort, lasted for over two decades. While many historians argue that this program was successful, I have argued that any successes associated with this program are overshadowed by the program's many shortfalls. Although the creation of the Bracero Program allowed the United States and Mexico to showcase their skills at diplomacy,¹⁴¹ the end result of their efforts created a system with detrimental effects for the participating Mexican nationals and a legacy of mistreatment and discrimination towards migrant workers.

The United States and Mexico worked diligently to create an international agreement that would fit the needs of both parties. Both Mexico and the United States had their own reasons for participating in this program. The United States desperately needed agricultural laborers to fill labor shortages caused by World War II and Mexico urgently needed a means to stop the illegal exodus of its citizens into the United States. These reasons, however, were not unique to the 1940s. The United States experienced labor shortages during World War I and in response to these shortages they turned to Mexican labor.¹⁴² The concern of illegal Mexican immigration has also been a concern for the

¹⁴¹ Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), ix, 50.

¹⁴² Fernando Saul Alanis Enciso, *El Primer Programa Bracero Y El Goberino De Mexico, 1917-1918* (San Luis Potosi: El Colegio de San Luis, 1999), 33-36.

Mexican government since the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution.¹⁴³ Although this first Bracero Program differed slightly from its predecessor, it illustrates that this phenomenon of the United States turning to Mexico for labor was not a new tactic developed during World War II. The fact that both the United States and Mexico participated in a temporary guest-worker program prior to the 1940s suggests that both countries had practice with this sort of program and that the 1942-1964 program should have been a success. While this program can claim certain successes related to economic stability, the failures resulting from poor planning, a lack of infrastructure, deliberate misconceptions perpetuated through government documents, and a rise in illegal immigration all overshadow the successes of the program, rendering the Bracero Program of 1942-1964 a failure.

The language used throughout the Bracero Program Agreements allowed and encouraged the use of certain stereotypical understandings of Mexicans. Central to these misconceptions was the notion that Mexicans were only “able-bodies,” worth what their bodies could produce in terms of manual labor.¹⁴⁴ This in turn allowed American farmers to take advantage of their Braceros. Other issues regarding the language within the Bracero Agreements created an understanding of Mexicans as commodities.¹⁴⁵ It reinforced the concept that the Bracero Program fostered a system of “legalized slavery”

¹⁴³ Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 58.

¹⁴⁴ Natalia Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican: Immigration, Race and Disability in the Early-Twentieth-Century United States,” *Radical History Review* 94 (Winter 2006): 24.

¹⁴⁵ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 47.

through which the labor of Mexican nationals was bought and sold.¹⁴⁶

From the onset of the Bracero Program, the United States was ill prepared for monitoring and enforcing this program. The lack of a sufficient policing force along the border allowed a steady flow of illegal immigrants to enter the United States without proper documentation.¹⁴⁷ The fact that there existed illegal immigrants willing to work for less than the hired and contracted Braceros created competition between the groups and undermined the reasons for the program. Bribery was also a major problem that flourished in the recruiting centers due to the fact that the United States and Mexico lacked sufficient supervision of the lower level officials.¹⁴⁸ This increase of illegal immigration also led to many media sources criminalizing Mexicans, without differentiating between “wetback” or legally contracted “Bracero.”¹⁴⁹

Although the creation of the Bracero Program fostered good relations between the United States and Mexico, the American treatment of Bracero workers weakened these relations. Despite the fact that the Bracero Program created an atmosphere of heated relations and a reality of mistreatment, Mexican nationals continued to clamor for Bracero contracts. In many instances Mexican nationals choose the poor conditions and

¹⁴⁶ David Bacon, “Immigrant Workers Ask Labor ‘Which Side Are You On?’” *WorkingUSA* vol.3 no.5 (January, February 2000): 15.

¹⁴⁷ Juan Ramon Garcia, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Illegal Immigrants in 1954* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 35-38.

¹⁴⁸ Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 36-37.

¹⁴⁹ Ronald, L. Mize and Alicia C.S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From The Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), xxxvi.

mistreatment in the United States to that of Mexico.¹⁵⁰

The legacy of the Bracero Program is riddled with contradictions much like the history of immigration into the United States is riddled with contradictions. This program left traces of an earnest attempt to satisfy the needs and alleviate the problems of both nations and individuals. However, in reality the Bracero Program created more problems than it could every have attempted to remedy. The repercussions of this program are still being felt by both countries to this day.

¹⁵⁰ Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, 20.

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* The digital interviews I used are available online at Heritage West, a database associated with the Colorado State Library. The twenty three interviews available on this database were all conducted with the help of the University of Texas, El Paso. These interviews are all conducted in Spanish with former Braceros, and all translations of these and other Spanish language documents are my own translations. Those interviews which I cited extensively are listed below, however, all interviews on this cite aided in my research and development of my argument.

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